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Duxbury Clipper

Ode to the A & P/ Grand Union

By JANE BRADLEY

For the final time last Saturday, we wandered through the dozen or so aisles of the A & P (oops, Grand Union), nearly vacant after a fortnight of scavenging. Still, we managed to find a few things: Epsom salts, bread crumbs, tortillas. My husband picked out Coppertone despite the November New England morning bluster. Total: about \$24 for \$72 worth of ... stuff. In all, it was a dispiriting trip, so unlike the perhaps 2,000 others I had taken before.

I could measure my adult life by that grocery store.



Twenty years ago, as a new-comer to town with toddler twins and another on the way, it is not an overstatement to say the A & P was the nexus of my social life. While stocking up on Pampers (one color, three sizes back then) or bread (no "low-carb" or "lite" either) I would recognize other mothers with the same harried look and pace.

At the applesauce and macaroni berths, we acknowledged each other yet again on our endless loop of daily chores. Over time, we became friends, and our kids became friends. Then, as I settled in, I recognized neighbors, co-workers and just fellow citizens in the check-out line. Until last weekend, we all bumped into each other at the A & P regularly. Predictably.

Eventually the children went off to school, and the A & P itself grew up. If you think it seems small now, you should have seen it before. The most recent black-and-white-tiled version is double what it had been, and it was disorienting to find scores of new products in expanded aisles after a major renovation some years back. At that time, natives harrumphed about the excess of it all – but that was an era before McMansions and mega-marts offering everything but funerals.

The A & P was a pillar of Duxbury, a kind of ancillary town hall, especially on weekends. This is where the band kids sold baked goods and Rotarians pushed rubber ducks. Where a hardy band of peace vigilantes carried their message throughout the Iraq war, and candidates passed petitions. Where windows were painted by Brownies at Halloween and Scouts caroled at Christmas.

Inside, longtime shoppers knew Mary and Adele at the register, Arnie in produce, Juan in meats, Joan in flowers, Bob and the formidable Ellen at the desk. We knew the after-school kids at the register, too.

Though some presume Duxbury to be snobby, the A & P proved otherwise. It was no-nonsense and unpretentious; it honored coupons and personal checks. If you lost your wallet there, they'd call you at home. (I know firsthand.) Older residents living just behind the store took carts back with them, and no one minded.

It was my favorite place to shop for many years, where I could buy what I needed, see some friendly faces and get back in my car in under a half hour. If the selection seemed less than stellar, well, I think Garrison Keillor said it best: "If you can't get it (here), you can probably get along without it."

Good-bye, A & P, my old friend. Thanks for the diapers, peppers, two-percent milk, Doritos, chicken breasts, orange juice, Hoodsies.

And memories.